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Turtles Are Our Ancestors

In our second report from the mountains and forests of India, we go to Assam with Shrishtee Bajpai to hear the story of the sacred Hajong lake and the origins of the Dimasa people. As a researcher into decolonial methodologies, she writes on how Indigenous storytelling is a key to a reconnection with the living speaking Earth and valuing its extraordinary biodiversity.



Sunrise in Samparidisa village, (photo: Shrishee Bajpai)

Shrishtee Bajpai

is a researcher-activist from India. Her current research focuses on radical alternatives, Indigenous worldviews, traditional/customary governance systems, bioregionalism and rights of nature. She is a member of Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence) in India, Global Tapestry of Alternatives and Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature.

29th November, 2023

OF EARTH AND EMPIRE

OTHER KINGDOMS

Share

It was
a
tender
cool
morning
in
December
but I was
restless.
I opened
the
window
to see
the light
outside
but it

was still
dark. I
slipped
back
under
the
warm
blanket
but
couldn't
sleep in
anticipation
of going
to 'the
lake'.

Soon it
dawned
clear
and the
rose-
coloured
hue of
the sky
spread
over the
paddy
fields.
We

started
walking
from the
village
through
the
fields to
the
shaded
wall of
trees,
from the
light to
the
shadow.
The
topmost
branches
were
molten
with sun
and the
frost
crunched
underfoot.
Exactly
half a
white

moon
hung in
the clear
sky
while
the
morning
was so
alive
with
bird
song
that it
seemed
the
forest
itself
was
singing.
A sweet
smell of
mud
and
bamboo
filled the
air.

During
my last

two
visits to
the
Dima
Hasao
district
of
Assam
for a
project
on
decolonial
methodologies,
I heard
many
stories
of
Hajong
lake.
Intrigued
by its
mysteries
and the
stories
of its
origin, I
was
finally

here.

The lake
is known
to be a
habitat
for rare
turtles
and
tortoises
in
Assam
and
believed
to be
ancestors
of the
villagers.

As we
walked
through
the
forest in
dim
light, I
took a
while for
my eyes
to find

birds in
the
dense
tropical
broadleaf
forests. I
could
see their
movement
but as
soon as I
looked
through
my
binoculars
to find
them,
they
were
lost.
Slowly,
my eyes
started
to
adjust.
As we
walked
ahead, I

found
scarlet
minivets,
gold
fronted
leafbird
(*chloropsis*)
,
bluethroated
barbet,
blue-
eared
barbet,
coppersmith
barbet,
common
kestrel,
racket-
tailed
drongo,
and
many
warblers
among
others.
Bit by
bit, a
patch of

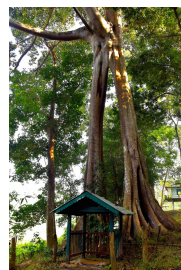
lichen, a
beard of
moss, a
200-
year-old
banyan
tree, and
two-foot
fungus
revealed
themselves.

Moving
through
the
forest, I
finally
saw the
green
shimmering
water.

The
delicate
sun rays
were
falling
on the
lake
making

their
way
through
the mist
that
rested
on the
top of
the lake,
while a
thick
forest
canopy
surrounded
it. I
started
to walk
around
the side
of the
lake and
nothing
seemed
to move
inside or
outside
it. No
fish, no

turtles,
no
movement
of water.
There
was an
eerie
stillness.
A
stillness
that
calms
you but
makes
you
uneasy
in the
gut.



As we

The Turtle
Worship
site near
Hajong
lake

moved
forward,
a huge
tree
stood
looking
like a
being
with
trunks
reaching
the sky
and the
canopy
so large
that it
seemed
endless.
Right
below
the tree
roots,
there
was a
small tin
shed
temple
with

tortoise
miniatures
at its
entry
right
below to
mark
the
presence
of
species
in the
lake.
Looking
at this
tree in
its full
magnificence,
living in
deep
time, as
an
abode to
spirits,
stunned
me. I
kept
regarding

it in awe.

In that
moment
of
wonder,
leaves at
the
topmost
branches
moved
rapidly.
Long,
brownish
hands
leaping
from
one
branch
to the
next and
a little
black
face
with
distinct
white
eyestripe
was

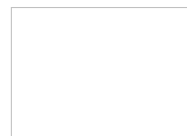
staring
at me
when I
looked
through
my
binoculars.

It was
Hoolock
gibbon
mother
and
child
who
were
inhabiting
that tree
along
with
numerous
other
birds
and
creatures.
Hoolock
gibbons
are
Asian

ape
species
and
currently
under
the
Threatened
species
list of
International
Union
for
Conservation
of
Nature
(IUCN).
They are
found
only in
forest
environments,
are
important
seed
dispersers,
and
depend
on a

contiguous
canopy.
Cutting
down
forests
directly
impacts
their
existence.
Similarly,
their
disappearance
directly
impacts
the
forests
and
other
species.

For a
while,
we sat
there



Hoolock
Gibbon

looking
at two
pairs of
whistling

teals and
hoping
to catch
a
glimpse
of rare
turtle
species.
Gibbons
continued
to make
their
characteristic
hu, hu,
hu with
pitch
going
louder
with
every
note.
The
mist on
the lake
by that
time had
dissipated,
the sun

was
sharper
and
birds
were
very
active
but still
there
was no
sign of
turtles.
By
noon,
we had
to make
our way
back to
the
village. I
was
despondent
but was
looking
forward
to
hearing
the story

of the
lake in
the
evening
as
promised
by
Gopendra
Kemprai,
an
indigenous
Dimasa
elder
from
Hajong
village
who
invited
us to his
home
for
dinner.

Later I
sat
excitedly
with my
pen and
paper at

Kemprai's
home:
'We
came
from far
off
lands,
possibly
Mongolia,
walking,
running, and
swimming
our way
and
settling
in areas
of
Dimapur
and
Maibong.'
he told
me. 'The
legend
goes that
the
Dimasas
inhabited
hills and

slopes to
the
north of
the
Brahmaputra,
and then
gradually
expanded
through
central
Assam.
Dimasa
is from
di, ma
and *sa*,
which
mean
“water”,
“big/
great”
and
“son”
respectively,
so “the
sons of a
big
river”.

He

started
his
narration
by
lamenting
the pain
in his
knee
joints
and how
that
affected
his
memory.
'I only
remember
30 per
cent of
the
entire
story.
Seventy
per cent
is lost,'
he said
after
gauging
my

excitement.

While

gently

caressing

his

knees, as

if that

helped

him

remember,

he then

began:

The

Dimasa

king

was

called

by

the

villagers

for

a

ceremonial

meal.

The

king

came

and

was
fed
lavishly.
His
food
was
served
on
a
big
leaf
which
was
thrown
away
with
other
leftovers
after
he
finished.
However,
the
next
morning
all
the
collected

leaves
were
missing.
It
was
nowhere
to
be
found
and
everyone
wondered
if
'we
didn't
dispose
of
it
off,
where
did
it
all
go'.
Several
young
people
gathered

and
decided
to
confront
whoever
was
stealing
their
food.
They
collected
sticks
and
sat
through
the
night.
In
the
middle
of
the
night,
in
the
extreme
dark,
a

bright
light
appeared.

As
their
eyes
adjusted
to
this
light,

a
dragon
stood
shining
bright
in
front
of
the
young
boys.

They
immediately
tried
killing
it
but
couldn't.

They
started
throwing
sticks
at
the
dragon
and
one
young
boy
pulled
out
a
sword.
He
hit
the
dragon
with
the
sword
and
cut
it
in
half.
One

half
of
the
dragon's
body
disappeared
into
the
forests
and
the
other
half
moved
the
earth
in
a
way
that
the
village
drowned
and
everyone
in
it
too.

The
entire
village
drowned.

The
king,
Raja
Gobind
Shundro
Hasnam

was
taken

to

see

it.

He

asked

to

see

what

was

below

the

water

and

ordered

that

the

lake
be
dug
up.
But
whoever
attempted
the
digging,
died.
Even
the
King's
son
died
trying.

Eventually,
the
spirit
of
the
lake
spoke
through
a
medium
and
communicated

that
the
lake
is
an
abode
to
the
spirit
now
and
needs
to
be
appeased.
The
spirit
would
protect
the
lake
and
live
here
while
the
humans
had

to
offer
their
services
in
its
upkeep.
So,
when
villagers
from
lower
Hajong
village
moved
up
here,
they
had
to
learn
from
their
ancestors'
mistakes
and
performed
several

ceremonies
to
appease
the
spirits
of
the
sacred
lake.
Since
then,
every
year
ceremonies
are
held
near
the
lake.

Villagers
and
researchers
working
in the
region
also
report
other

versions
of the
story. An
alternative
version
goes:

Once
upon
a
time,
Hajong
was
a
prosperous
village
but
one
day
when
the
villagers
caught
an
old
python
living
in
the

village
underground
and
killed
it
for
the
meat,
the
sin
of
killing
the
python
became
a
curse
and
the
village
on
that
night
sank
into
a
lake.
Those

who
had
python's
meat
became
turtles
and
drowned.
Except
one
old
virtuous
widow,
who
was
cautioned
in
her
dream
to
not
eat
the
python
meat
and
to
leave

the
village.
She
later
spread
the
news
to
other
villages
and
told
the
misfortune
of
Hajong
elders.
Hence,
it
is
believed
that
the
turtles
found
in
the
lake

are
ancestors
of
the
present
day
villagers.

There
might be
many
versions
of the
story but
the
underlying
current
of all of
them is
that the
lake is
sacred to
people.
A site of
the
human
practice
of
sufficiency,

of
respecting
the
limits of
extraction,
of
reverence.
The lake
since
then has
been
protected
and
human
interaction
is
dependent
on the
rules of
relationship
set by
the
protector
spirit of
the lake.
No
hunting
is

allowed,
no tree
cutting,
no
catching
of
turtles,
no
fishing
unless
ceremonies
are
performed,
no
loitering,
no
bathing
in the
lake, no
use of
water
from the
lake.
These
rules
have to
be
followed

to
maintain
a
reciprocal
co-
existence
among
humans
and
more-
than
humans.
This is
'horizontal
living'
where
humans
are not
above
the rest
of
nature
rather
just one
part of
the
larger
ecosystem

that they
collectively
inhabit.
The
protector
deity is
believed
to be
aggressive
and 'if
disobeyed
or if
their
home,
the lake,
is
disrespected
then the
spirit
possesses
the
humans
and
makes
them
mad,'
added
Kempriai

hesitantly
as the
evenings
are
usually
avoided
when
talking
about
the
spirits

No
hunting
is
allowed,
no
tree
cutting,
no
catching
of
turtles,
no
fishing

unless
ceremonies
are
performed,
no
loitering,
no
bathing
in the
lake,
no use
of
water
from
the
lake.

Hajong
lake is
about
526.78
hectares
in size
and has
been

declared
a
Biodiversity
Heritage
Site
(BHS)
under
the
National
Biodiversity
Act in
India.
This
designation
recognises
the need
of
protection
with the
mandate
of
maintaining
customary
practices
for
tending
and
protecting

them,
and
encouraging
the
preservation
of
traditional
community
knowledge.
This
offers a
possibility
to bring
in
customary
knowledge,
stories
rather
than just
scientific
designations.

This
lake is
known
to be
one of
the few
rare

natural
tortoise
habitats
in
Assam
and is
home to
a few
varieties
of hill
terrapins
(a rare
species)
and
critically
endangered
freshwater
black
softshell
turtle,
Indian
peacock
softshell
turtle,
besides
other
major
flora and

fauna.
This site
also
harbours
threatened
species
like the
critically
endangered
Chinese
pangolin,
clouded
leopard,
Asiatic
black
bear,
fishing
cat,
capped
langur,
wreathed
hornbill
among
others.

On
reaching
the lake
you

might
wonder
why the
lake still
shelters
dozens
of
turtles.

One
obvious
reason is
that for
centuries,
Dimasas
respected
and
protected
the lake
as an
entity
on its
own.

Respecting
the
limits of
humans
and
what

they can
take,
when
they can
take,
how
much
they can
take in
accordance
with the
rules set
by the
spirits of
the lake.
They
adapted
themselves
to the
rhythms
and
moods
of the
rest of
nature.
Hajong
turtles
are not

merely
animals,
they are
beings,
ancestors
who
must be
respected
and not
killed.

‘The
spirit of
the lake
sometimes
roams in
the
village
and we
are
scared
of it. We
perform
a
ceremony
every
year in
the
month

of
August,
Jubras to
appease
the
spirits of
the lake
and seek
penance
for past
actions,’
Kemprai
says.

Despite
this
reverence,
village
elders
tell us
that it is
not
quite the
same as
in
earlier
days: for
most of
the

present
generation
killing a
turtle
means
nothing.
Over the
last two
to three
years,
incidents
of
poachers
coming
from
faraway
villages
have
also
occurred.
‘The
younger
generation
has just
inherited
these
forests
and a

beautiful
lake.
They
haven't
worked
hard for
it. They
see all
these
resources
around
and feel
that they
make
money
out of
them.
They are
intoxicated
by the
outside
world
and its
modernity.
Once
that
intoxication
is over

they
might
realise
how
important
nature is
around
us for
our
survival,'
says
Kempriai
while
reflecting
on rapid
changes
in
worldviews
of
younger
generations.

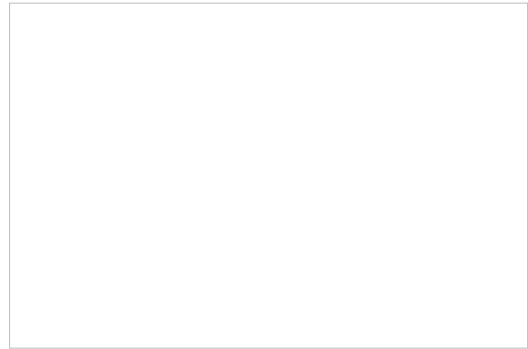
To
mitigate
this
growing
disconnect
and
maintain

the
generation-
old
reciprocity,
every
year on
the bank
of
Hajong
lake a
Tortoise/Turtle
Festival
is
organised.
This
festival
aims to
create
awareness
among
the
villagers,
as well
as
villages
surrounding
Hajong
about

the
safety
and
importance
of
endangered
species.

The
larger
intention
is to
keep
narrating
these
stories
so that
the
traditional
knowledge
is not
lost
because
when
these
stories
are lost,
knowledge
is lost

and
sacred
sites are
forgotten.



Hajong lake

Storytelling – an art of decolonising

Our
times
are
defined
by a
story
told us
centuries
ago. A
story

that says
all
humanity
must
pass
through
stages of
progress.
If they
haven't
then
they are
not
developed.
They
continue
to be
'uncivilised
savages'.
We need
to tell
other
stories
now: let
the lost
ones be
retold,
and

create
new
ones.
Stories
that
bring
the rest
of
nature
alive, of
emergence,
of
memory,
of loss,
of
creation,
of the
more-
than
human
world. It
is an
epistemic
as well
as an
ethical
and
political

process.

The
story of
Hajong
lake and
many
such
stories
speak of
life lived
in
relationships.

They
speak of
reigniting
the idea
of
nature
being
alive and
in this
realising
our own
aliveness.

They
speak of
looking,
listening,

and
being in
this
world in
many
diverse
ways. In
many
ways
articulating
how
climate
change
can't be
solved
unless
we
fundamentally
question
the roots
of crises
we live
in. And
how our
distorted
sense of
existence,
as

separated
from the
rest of
nature,
is what
has
brought
us to this
collapse.
It calls
for our
actions
to be
place-
based
and
responsible.

As a
society
we need
to begin
listening,
paying
attention
and
offering
space to
people

who are
the
keepers
of these
stories.
The
knowledge
and
worldviews
of local
communities
are
either
used as a
commodity,
in
isolation
of
custodians
of that
knowledge
or
sometimes
completely
absent
from the
corridors
of power

and
decision
making
spaces.
Nurturing
decoloniality
calls for
creating
spaces
for
people
to share
these
stories
and for
us to
recall
our lost
stories,
create
our own
stories
and
discover
the
radical
interconnectedness
between

our
lives.

But it
also calls
for us to
ask: do
we care
where
our food
comes
from?
Do we
care
what
species
surround
us or
once
did? Are
we
amazed
at the
journey
bar-
headed
geese
make
while

flying
from the
top of
Everest
to the
eastern
Himalayas?
Are we
ready to
stand in
solidarity
with
communities
when a
mining
company
destroys
the
biodiverse
forests,
wiping
out the
entire
living,
thriving
human
and
non-

human
community?
How can
we tell
different
stories:
mountains
as
keepers
of
knowledge,
rivers as
living
beings,
forests
as
community
and
humans
beginning
to
understand
and
listen.
We need
to stay
with the
question:

how can
we
challenge
a culture
that
fundamentally
rewards
conquests
of mind?

Dark Mountain: Issue 24 – Eight Fires

Our Autumn
2023 full
colour edition
is an
ensemble
exploration of
the eight
ceremonial
fires of the
year,
celebrated in
practices,
stories, poetry
and artwork.

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INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGEMORE-THAN-HUMAN**Reply**

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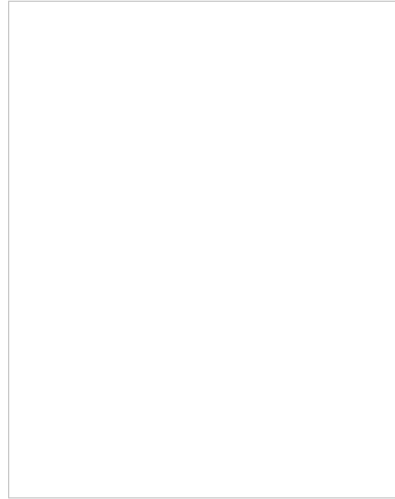
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Planting Garl

[anisa george](#) 30th October

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practices from our
today Anisa George
instruction for her
practice, Planting
artwork by Dan Po
Candace Jensen, F
everyone!

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